ORIGIN/ACTION: ARA

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DEPARTMENT OF STATE

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DEPARTMENT OF STATE

AIRGRAM

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A-84 — CONFIDENTIAL

NO. — HANDLING INDICATOR

TO : Department of State

EO11652: GDS

TAGS : PINS, PORS, ASEC, SHUM, GT

DEPT PASS: MANAGUA, SAN JOSE, SAN SALVADOR, TEGUCIGALPA USCINCSO QUARRY HEIGHTS CZ

FROM : AmEmbassy GUATEMALA DATE: September 29, 1978

SUBJECT : Monthly Report on Violence and Human Rights: July 1978

REF :

SUMMARY. The new administration of President Lucas registered some pluses and a few minuses in the human rights area during the first month of office. The number of politically related deaths declined from the levels of previous months, although the press speculated on the possible reemergence of "death squad" killings of common criminals. Twenty-two persons died and three were severely wounded in attacks which had political overtones. The most dramatic were the takeover by the Guerrilla Army of the Poor (EGP) of the town of Palin in Escuintla Department and the killing of a student/labor leader (Mario MUJIA Córdova) in Huehuetenango.

The new administration promised to observe human rights while carrying out its commitment to maintaining law and order. During July its efforts produced an image of moderation in contrast to the heavy-handedness anticipated by the leftist opposition, an expectation stimulated by the appointment of a hard-line National Police chief. Statements from the Ministry of Defense and Ministry of Government, however, were disquieting. The Government ratified the American Human Rights Convention. END SUMMARY.

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GOVERNMENT-RELATED VIOLENCE. The Guatemalan press raised the question of whether government-sponsored "death squads" were responsible for the deaths of a number of persons later identified as "repeat criminal offenders." According to La Tarde on July 28, some 36 executions, usually accompanied by signs of torture, had taken place in the previous twelve days.

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FORM DS-323 4-62

Drafted by: POL:RFKing:mc

Contents and Classification Approved by: ADCM:AMIsaacs

Clearances: POL:VHBlocker (draft)

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REVIEWED BY ____ DATE 2 OCT. 1981
PORTIONS DENIED AS INDICATED

Minister of Government Donaldo ALVAREZ eventually acknowledged the possible existence of such murder squads but insisted such groups, if they existed, had no connection with the police or the government.

[redacted] This execution activity engendered little public response, however. Only the Christian Democrats expressed outrage and demanded an investigation.

July saw one specific complaint of government repression against campesinos: In San Juan Cotzal, El Quiché Department, campesino Andrés Pérez Gómez blamed soldiers (kaibiles) for beating him and trying to kill him in his home, allegedly in front of his family. He survived, and sought out labor union officials to pass on his charges of government repression against campesinos in his area, charges which in one form or another have been heard for several years. Northern El Quiché is an area of off-and-on EGP activity.

GUERRILLA-RELATED VIOLENCE. The EGP briefly took over the town of Palín, Escuintla, haranguing the villagers. Upon departing, the terrorists engaged the police in a fire fight. They killed one policeman and wounded another. The EGP reportedly also took over a hamlet in Huehuetenango (San Rafael la Independencia) for a short period and distributed propaganda leaflets. (Guatemala 4039) Three criminals were "rescued" by men dressed in olive drab in Taxisco, Escuintla. Government officials are puzzled as to the identity of the "rescuers" as the criminals had at no time been believed to have ties with guerrilla groups or subversive organizations.

OTHER VIOLENCE. While the authors of violence remained largely unidentified in July, more of the victims were sufficiently labeled to suggest probable aggressors.

On July 20, Mario MUJIA Córdova, a student/labor leader in Huehuetenango was murdered (Guatemala 4367). Officials connected with firms where Mujía was carrying out labor organizing activities have been suspected; the manager of one of the plants was briefly detained. Mujía's death

added to the climate of protest of recent months stimulated by the killings in Panzós and the death of Father López. Mujía is being compared to last year's "labor martyrs," such as labor lawyer López Larrave.

Some seven campesinos were killed. These included one killed by a group dressed in olive green, another who reportedly had been sought by the police in connection with a murder, and another found dead on the banks of the Polochic near Panzós. [redacted]

On the other hand, several persons were killed whose identities suggest the responsibility of leftist groups. These included a comisionado militar (an unpaid military recruiter with limited enforcement responsibilities), a former member of a government security force, a departmental director of the conservative Partido Institucional Democratico (PID) in El Progreso, and a farm administrator and alcalde auxiliar (deputy sheriff). The latter was also killed by men dressed in olive drab.

HUMAN RIGHTS ATMOSPHERICS. The heavy-hand anticipated by President Lucas' leftist opposition did not materialize in July. One of the first opportunities for a confrontation took place when protestors of the death of Father López (Guatemala 3882) marched to Guatemala City from nearby San José Pinula. According to government sources, they had prior authorization to march. The demonstration came off without incident. The government observed similar restraint in connection with a strike of bus drivers which continues to hamper everyday activity in the capital. The Minister of Labor was called upon to assist in working out a solution. The Minister's efforts during the month of July were generally pro-labor and earned him a measure of respect from a previously skeptical audience including some labor leaders. Concrete results, however, were limited and his performance must be judged in the coming months.

Early in the month, President Lucas met with the Communist-influenced Panzós Committee and authorized its visit to the Panzós area (Guatemala 4230). The Committee's subsequent report described three different versions of events in Panzós on May 30 and said the Committee would press for court action against those responsible for what transpired. Inevitably, the Army came in for the lion's share of the blame.

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In connection with the travel of Guatemalan students to Havana for the World Youth Festival (Guatemala 4332), the Ministry of Foreign Affairs announced that Guatemalans are free to travel anywhere. Despite expectations of reprisal by some observers, the students have since returned. No complaints have emerged to date of government reprisal or intimidation.

On the other hand, a number of workers in Guatemala City were arrested allegedly for distributing subversive propaganda. B-1 ED EB [redacted] The workers were eventually released by the courts for lack of basis for the charges (Guatemala 4738).

Also on the negative side were threats emanating from the Ministry of Defense and Minister of Government. The human rights-oriented Committee for Peace and Justice has for months been a thorn in the side of the government through its publication of frequent anti-government declarations. Its threshhold of tolerance breached, the Ministry of Defense announced that the Committee's actions were illegal since it lacked personería jurídica (legal existence) and that it would take the Committee to court. B-1 ED [redacted]

The Minister of Government, disturbed, he maintained, by the failure of certain groups to engage in dialogue -- he specifically mentioned the ATRG (Guatemalan radio and telegraph workers) -- issued a warning to "those bent on confrontation with the government." "While they may have arms, we have more arms," the press quoted the Minister as saying.

The government published its ratification of the American Convention on Human Rights in the official gazette on July 14, 1978. The head of the Council of State, Vice President Francisco VILLAGRAN KRAMER, took the unprecedented step of calling a press conference to stress the importance of the Convention and its full implementation in Guatemala.

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There was one political asylum case during the month, in the Venezuelan Embassy. Although safe conduct was granted, it was clear that the asylee was not fleeing persecution.

Finally, President Lucas' inaugural address July 1 was notable for its frank exposition of the inequities in Guatemalan society and their role in stimulating violence. He made specific mention of Guatemalan obligations in the human rights area under the UN Charter.

Statistics. Of the 22 deaths for which we surmise political circumstances, 11 were in the Indian highlands (a higher than usual proportion), 2 were in the Pacific lowlands, 4 were in Guatemala City, 3 were in Izabal, and 2 were in the Oriente.

Addendum: We have learned from a well-placed Revolutionary Party (PR) source that the frontier-style killing of the mayor of Iztapa (Escuintla Department) and three companions in May was not political, but rather involved a woman ("un asunto de faldas"). The statistics for May should be adjusted downward. The incident illustrates the pitfalls of characterizing Guatemalan violence on the basis of appearances.

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